Coasting

Watsonville artist among Calabash Awards winners

Painter Carmen León leads diverse field of honorees for excellence in ethnic arts

By DONALD ALSTON
FOR THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Santa Cruz County, fortunate in many ways, has a thriving culture of extraordinary artists. To acknowledge local artists, the Santa Cruz Ethnic Arts Network, a nonprofit organization, will present this year's distinguished artists with its Calabash Awards for excellence in the ethnic arts, including music, dance, drumming, spoken word and visual arts.

One of the winners this year is Carmen León, an artist and teacher who has made lasting contributions to the schools and community in the Watsonville area.

Since the mid-1970s, León has worked in the South County area painting murals and teaching for the SPECTRA Arts in Education Program, administered by the Cultural Council of Santa Cruz County. She considers herself fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with students in the Pajaro Valley.

Born in San Francisco to parents of Mexican and Peruvian decent, León followed her childhood dream by studying at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Living in Europe for five years gave her the opportunity to visit the museums of France, Italy and Spain.

Inspired by dreams, personal narratives and mythological themes that reflect her Latino heritage, León's works, radiantly colorful, are literary sketches that stimulate the imagination of the viewer.

The first mural she did in Watsonville can still be seen at the Watsonville Charter School of the Arts (formerly Radcliff School). Painted in the '70s, it depicts motifs from ancient Mexican cultures.

Another of her murals is at Mintie White School. León was pleased about the project because fourth and fifth graders participated both in the design and the painting of the mural, which depicts life's transformations and the plume serpent, a mythical creature.

Currently, she is working on a mural in the waiting area for the Women, Infants, and Children Program located in the La Manzana Center. The work in progress portrays wholesome family scenes.

León said she appreciates the Calabash Award because it "acknowledges her work in the community ... the importance of community and schools ... and the importance of taking care of our children." She added, "I am merely a recipient of something that goes to all artists."

Another honoree is Mandjou Kone, an African dance instructor and singer who has taught and performed traditional dances of West Africa for seven years in Santa Cruz County. Kone is also a Griot, one who keeps the history of her people and passes it on through story and song.

Jewish storyteller Erica Lann Clark blends tales from her family history and other cultures with music, movement and humor. Lann Clark has made it her mission to tell extraordinary stories and to educate new audiences of all ages about storytelling.

One of her recent theatrical pieces, "Cooking Up Your Real Self," will open at the Actors' Theatre in Santa Cruz on March 27.

La Romera is a Flamenco dancer and teacher who is considered by her peers to be one of the most authentic interpreters of Flamenco in the United States. Locally, she is an artist with the SPECTRA program. She has also participated in

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At a glance

WHAT: The Calabash Awards.
WHEN: 7 p.m. Sunday.
WHERE: Cabrillo College Theatre.
TICKETS: Adults $12/$15; children, seniors $8/$10.
DETAILS: 421-9523.

Courtesy of Sarah Blade

Watsonville artist Carmen León poses in front of one of her works in this undated photo.